

## mistaken identity | Connecting with the part of you that remains steady is the key to accepting change.



### **Dr̥gdarsana sakyoh ekatmata iva asmita**

False-identification is confusing the nature of the seer or Self with the nature of the instrument of perception. In other words, false identification happens when we mistake the mind, body, or senses for the true Self.

Yoga Sutra II.6

**ONE OF MY STUDENTS** is a successful, fit, attractive, and happy woman in her mid-50s. Recently she told me that as the years passed, she found herself feeling less and less comfortable in her own skin. Every time she looked in the mirror, she would notice how her skin was changing with age and feel unhappy and rattled, almost as if she didn't recognize herself. This distress over the physical changes my student was experiencing as she grew older is a striking example of what Patanjali describes in Yoga Sutra II.6 as *asmita*, or false-identification.

Sometimes translated as "ego," *asmita* is the second of five afflictions of the mind, or *klesas*, outlined in the second chapter of the Yoga Sutra. *Asmita* happens when you identify with the parts of yourself that change—everything from your mind to your body, appearance, or job title—instead of with the quiet place within you that does not change. It's when you mistakenly believe, on some level, that how you look or feel or what you do for a living (or even how nice or beat-up of a car you drive) has something to do with who you are and that these things define you, instead of recognizing that your true Self—who you are at your core—is unchanging.

According to yoga philosophy, this unchanging part of you is known as the

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## living yoga

“seer”—the *cit*, *drasta* (*drg*), or *purusa*—that which experiences or “sees” the world through the lens of the mind. As Patanjali explains in the Yoga Sutra, the mind—which includes your thoughts, emotions, and even the sensory input you receive from your body—is the instrument of perception through which the seer engages with the world around you.

The seer is what you might think of as your inner voice or guide. It’s often referred to simply as the Self. It’s your true essence, and yoga teaches that this essence remains stable no matter what happens around you or to you, whether you feel connected with this part of you or far removed from it.

Asmita, or false identification, is common to everyone because our external qualities inevitably influence how we see ourselves. You may identify with your gender, your sexual preference, your ethnicity, or the style of yoga you practice.

Perhaps your perception of yourself includes that you are tall, muscular, sensible, brunette, tattooed, compassionate, a parent, a yoga practitioner, and a gourmet cook. These qualities are a big part of how you see yourself and how your loved ones and friends see you, and appreciating and enjoying them is an important part of the way you engage in the world.

The challenge, and where the lesson of this sutra lies, is that while it’s great to appreciate and value all of these aspects of yourself, if you identify too closely with the changeable aspects of yourself, Patanjali says that you set yourself up for disappointment and suffering.

When change comes, as it inevitably does for any number of reasons, you may feel uncomfortable, even cast adrift—as my student did when she noticed how her skin was changing with age. (Of course, we don’t perceive all change as negative, but the same teaching applies—if you get

## getting to know you

### TAKE TIME TO NURTURE YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR SELF.

Connecting with the Self is the solution to asmita, but that “self” can feel elusive and difficult to connect with, particularly when you’re struggling with issues of self-acceptance. When the connection feels hard to establish, this practice of cultivating feelings of gentleness and patience with yourself can help.

Find a place where you feel comfortable, nurtured, and supported and that you associate with feeling like your best self. If you cannot find such a physical place, think of a place or a memory that you associate with this feeling. It might be a spot under a tree you loved as a child or the memory of playing a favorite game or riding your bike. As you reflect on this place or memory, try to connect with that feeling of who you are at your core: how you feel at your most authentic self.

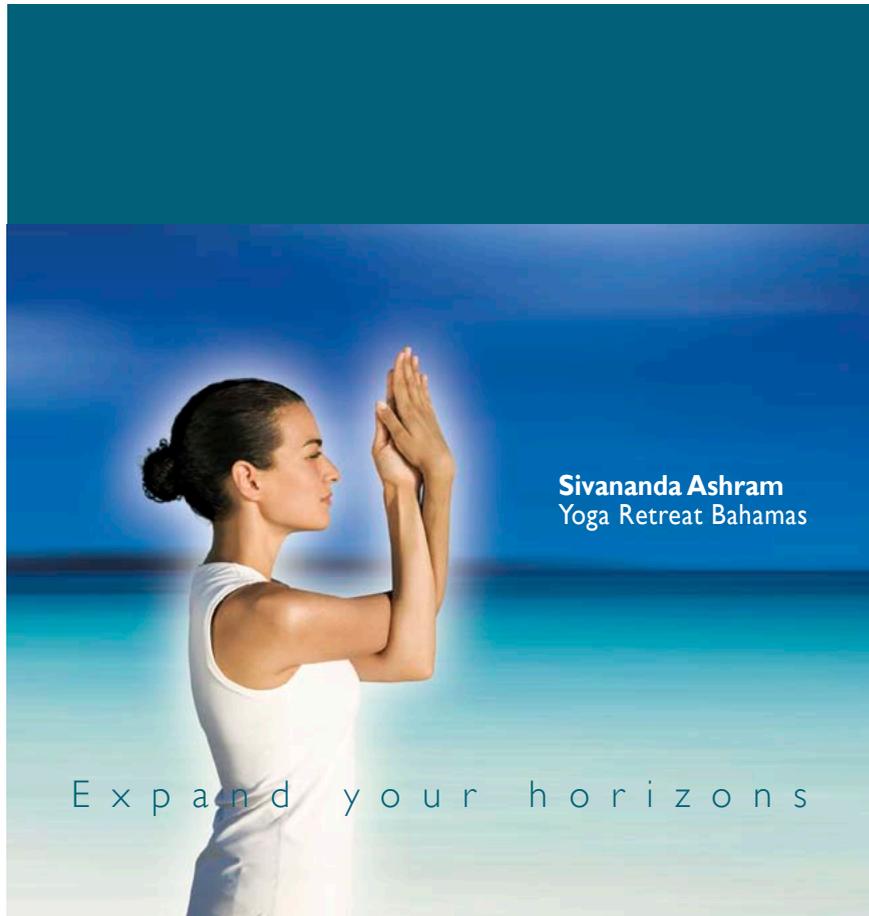
Once you feel connected to this place where you most feel like yourself, remember that even though your body and circumstances may

have changed, that same person is within you. If there’s a particular circumstance that is troubling you, try to cultivate feelings of compassion and friendliness toward yourself by imagining how a friend or loved one might comfort you.

Spend a few breaths or minutes connecting with this image and these feelings before bed, first thing in the morning, or during a break in the day. Do this every day over several weeks—cultivating a relationship with the Self takes time.

Spend time with yourself in other ways, too. Doing asana, singing, running, or any other activity you enjoy can be a way to nurture this relationship if you can focus beyond the physical body to connect more deeply with yourself.

Over time and with practice, your relationship with your Self can be strengthened in almost any activity you choose, and your yoga will truly become a practice in action.



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a great haircut or a big promotion, win the lottery, or lose 100 pounds, those things may bring you pleasure and satisfaction, but they don't define you.)

Enjoying the transitory aspects of our bodies is part of the beauty and richness of being alive. These aspects of your Self are an important part of who you are. They're just not *all* that you are. If you can recognize that there is something deeper within you that is unchanging—your true, authentic Self—and if you can connect and identify with that part of yourself, which is so much more than your appearance and achievements in the world, says Patanjali, you are likely to be less bothered by physical changes (or any other changes) that are beyond your control.

**TRUE YOU**

When it comes to the changes that happen as you age, like those that were troubling my student, Patanjali is not saying you cannot grieve over these changes. Who wouldn't want to go through life with 20-year-old skin? Nor would he say that you shouldn't color your gray hair if you want to, exercise to stay fit, or continue to do the things you love as you get older—as long as you understand that none of it affects who you are at your core.

The key to self-acceptance, according to Patanjali, is that the more connected you are with the unchanging Self, the less you suffer from the inevitable changes of the non-Self. This ability to discern what is your true Self from what is not—to connect with that true, authentic Self and to act as often as possible from that quiet, knowing place—is the key to feeling better as a result of your yoga practice.

When I first began studying with my teacher, T.K.V. Desikachar, more than twenty years ago, he told me, "Yoga is relationship." As I have reflected on the many layers and meanings of this definition over the years, I have come to appreciate that, in fact, the most important relationship you will ever have is your relationship with the Self. ❖

*Kate Holcombe is the founder and president of the nonprofit Healing Yoga Foundation in San Francisco. Learn more at [healingyoga.org](http://healingyoga.org).*